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Taking a Walk

Taking a walk on a cloudy day is an underrated activity. I suppose it's a hobby reserved for the desperate. Enjoying the day that everyone else gave up on, learning to be happy without the sun is a skill that requires strength. For a long time, I wondered if I ever had it.

The clinking of silverware spoke more than the people at the actual dinner table until...

"So, homecoming! Are you excited, Henry?" I looked at my dad, who broke the silence in an attempt to bring out the joy he hadn't seen in months. Discussion of a football game was not the way to do it, though. I was only going because I felt as though it was an obligation forced on me by the constructs of high school.

"No. I hate football," I replied. My dad looked down at his plate, waving the figurative white flag.

"But it's more about the social part!" My mom informed me with a fake smile. I had friends, sure, but my bond with them was about as thin as a sheet of ice a couple days into spring.

I mustered a simple "Yeah," quiet enough to go unheard by the most attentive librarian. My chicken sandwich was bland, but I had to give Dad credit for making dinner. I thanked him for the food, and headed over to the high school football field after zipping my Calvin Klein jacket and getting in my car.

The car's aux feature serenaded me with comfort and dreaminess to help me forget where I was going. I sang along with Édith Piaf:

“Give your heart and soul to me
And life will always be
Je vois la vie en rose...”

I parked relatively far away, but stayed in the car long enough to ease my nerves before flinging myself into this overly-social scenario. This feeling is overly familiar to me, specifically before every social situation. It’s an anxiety so common that I named it Parker, although lately I worry that its name is Henry.

The comfort of the warm fall greeted me as I counted my steps towards the bleachers, desperately searching for my friends. I found their section and snuck through the somewhat filled aisle to find my spot. As I scooted past the boys who rarely cracked a smile, I heard one of them mutter, “Faggot.” I temporarily froze, but continued to move. “*Water off a duck’s back,*” I repeated in my brain over and over. Words begin to lose their meaning once they’ve been said enough.

I said hello to my friends and once my overly tight jeans greeted the cold, metal bleacher, I felt comforted that I was finally locked in place. I could now just sit back and engage with my peers, be a statue with a smile. I didn’t want to admit it to myself, but I was shaken up by what that boy said.

It seemed that my entrance had interrupted Tristan’s story, but he continued once my arrival became old news. In other words, he continued after about ten seconds. When he spoke, everyone around him listened as if they were watching their favorite movie; especially Cassie, because it was a poorly kept secret that she was head over heels for him. Tristan was too self-

absorbed to notice. Alex laughed hysterically, even before the punchline of the story. Pretending was her strong suit. She had dangerously good people skills.

While Brady, an overly passionate academic, got in an argument with Cassie over veganism, my eyes drifted toward James. His blonde hair blew in the light breeze as he appeared on the stairs of the bleachers, adjusting his green turtleneck. I was surprised he showed up, considering he usually didn't go to these types of events. The only friend he had at school was the history teacher. Watching him stiffen his neck as he looked around with either confidence or fear was much more engaging than anything else. What was he looking for? My heart skipped a beat when he looked towards me and caught me staring. James smiled, I waved, and he walked towards the top of the bleachers. Trying my best to hide my blushing, I rejoined the conversation, which was now about climate change.

The night got cooler and stayed consistently dull. By halftime, I could tell our team was losing judging by the atmosphere. The sun's exit reminded me of the speed of time. Therefore, I was glad to greet the fresh night. I didn't know at the time, but it was so incredibly young. While the miserable marching band butchered "Crazy Train" during the halftime show, my friends got up to buy concessions. I had no choice but to move with them. Stretching my legs felt good as I waited in line and laughed along to Tristan's jokes. His delivery reminded me of an amateur stand-up comedian. I wondered if there would ever be a time where I could be the life of the party. It's not that I don't *want* to be social, I just that I *can't* be social. Not until I find someone I could let listen.

Once my friends and I finally got our overly salted popcorn, we walked back to our territory. As we walked onto the stairs, I caught another glimpse of James. He was sitting alone, the only person on the very top isle. A fashionable yet subtle purple backpack was placed next to

him. Incredibly focused, he was taking pictures of the final moments of the halftime performance. “*Of course,*” I thought. I completely forgot that he was in the yearbook club.

I was the last person in the group to find my seat. “Who were you looking at?” Alex asked me, with sly interest across her face.

“Nothing...No one,” I chuckled instinctively.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” I bluntly replied.

Alex’s subtle evil took full form. “Henry has a crush!” She exclaimed.

“What?” Tristan asked.

“Who?” Cassie grinned.

“That’s literally not true,” I rolled my eyes.

“Who is she?” Brady asked.

“Or he...” Tristan muttered.

“Tristan, that’s not funny,” Alex scolded.

“I never said it was.”

“Oh my God” I exhaustedly replied.

A long silence followed. The one time they paid attention to me was this aggressive, hurtful occasion. I had had enough. The straw had broken my back. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I said as I stood up.

“Henry, wait I’m sorry,” I heard behind me as I walked away. I just needed to be away from the insincere, careless group of people who were somehow able to make this evening worse. As I walked towards the parking lot, something came over me. It was a feeling that derived from pure hopelessness and yet gave me bravery. A voice within me whispered, “*What*

do you have to lose?" The answer was nothing. *"What do you have to gain?"* The answer was a snapshot of James's smile. I turned around and walked to the top row of the bleachers, avoiding eye contact with any of my peers. I counted my steps until I reached the top isle.

I turned my body towards James's spot and walked towards it in the least creepy way possible. I sat down, immediately proud of myself for getting to this point. I stared straight ahead but I could feel him looking at me. I shifted my head just enough to see him in my peripheral vision. He turned his head to look straight ahead.

"Did you and your friends fight?" He asked coolly, but with sincerity.

"I'm not sure you could call them that..." I replied. The hurt showed itself in my voice.

"Ouch."

"Yeah," I chuckled.

"It's really really hard to find friends in high school, especially when you're gay--"

"I'm not gay," I snapped instinctively.

"I wasn't talking about you," He stated. There was a brief pause. I felt so embarrassed.

"Oh. I'm sorry. That was weird..."

"No, I'm sorry too," James replied. "Are you OK?"

I was truly taken aback by someone asking me that question and sounding like they meant it, especially when that question came from a stranger. "Oh, that's a loaded question. Um... I'm as OK as I'll ever be."

He said, "I feel that" and we both laughed rather awkwardly.

I tried to think of something to say. "I like your turtleneck" was the only thing I could come up with.

"Thanks! You're the only straight guy to ever tell me that," He replied, laughing.

The words spit out of me like lava from a volcano: “Oh, well... I’m not really...” James looked at me once I looked at him; “I’m not really straight.” We both knew that that was the first time I had said that out loud.

He said, “Alright” as if he had just solved a mystery. Silence followed. We watched the game while waiting for more to discuss.

“So do you also not know how football works?” I asked with a grin on my face.

“Of course I don’t. Who do you think I am?” He jokingly clapped back. We both laughed. I turned to watch his precious giggle and my heart fluttered. I felt like I was getting younger.

James looked at me while he began his story: “When I was in third grade, my dad tried to get me into sports. We tried every form of athleticism but it just didn’t click for me. During baseball games, I would sit in the outfield and put gravel in my cap. During football, I cried out of fear. During soccer, I cried out of confusion. During track and field, I fell on my face while trying the long jump... the list goes on.” I cackled while he continued; “And I kept trying to be something I’m not but it’s just a rule from God. I can’t be athletic. Dancing is my only form of athleticism, and even that is questionable.” James laughed along with me.

It was my turn to talk. I said, “I feel like it’s number one on the dad checklist to make your son try sports.” James promptly laughed. He laughed at something I said, which seemed like the highest honor I could receive.

His smile slowly faded, however. He explained, “Yeah, that’s no different from how it was in the nineteen-fifties. It’s disappointing. Everybody thinks society has rapidly changed from then to now... but it all mostly stays the same.” His looked around, prompting me to do the same. “Look at where we are right now. We’re at this meaningless football game because society

told us to be, just like how it told people like us years ago; And here we are, on the top row of the bleachers because we're the decades-old cliches--"

"Or maybe we're up here because we're the only cool ones," I responded. James laughed and considered it. I went on, "That's so pessimistic...to think nothing changes."

"Prove me wrong," He replied

"Well... maybe we don't change as a society. Maybe all we can do is change as individual people, you know?"

"I like to think so." A pause followed. He stated, "That got deep quick." We both chuckled. At that very moment, our school's team scored their first touchdown and all we could do was shriek along to the contagious joy exuding from the bleachers.

Once the excitement died down, I joked, "See? Our team's losing streak just changed." James grinned and said everything he needed to say by looking into my eyes, which was something along the lines of "*I'm glad you're here with me.*" After a brief pause, I asked him what music he listened to, to which he replied with, "Lots of The Beatles and lots of Lady Gaga. What about you?" I felt pure shame in my answer, but I also realized he would accept it either way. "Mainly Edith Piaf," I spit out.

"Who?" A swing and a miss.

"She does french jazz. It's some of the most beautiful stuff ever made," I stated with partial pride.

"Cool," he said, looking at me with a grin. I think that by this point, he noticed that he controlled my heart with his eyes. "It's getting pretty cold. Should we go?" I nearly imploded when he asked me this.

"To where?"

“I don’t know. We’ll see when we get there.”

Once he grabbed his backpack, we both walked down the bleachers. We walked past the homophobic boy, past my fair-weather friends, past the concessions booth, past the exit and into the parking lot. I was no longer counting my steps.

Taking a walk on a cloudy day is an underrated activity. I suppose it’s a hobby reserved for the desperate, but also for the mindful. Enjoying the day that everyone, including yourself, gave up on, learning to be happy without the sun is a skill that requires strength. For a long time, I wondered if I ever had it.

THE END